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Astronauts of the Western Pamirs: Mobility, Power, and Disconnection in High Asia

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Abstract

How can we think about mobility between places in High Asia that are disconnected by complex national boundaries as well as by colonial and Cold War legacies? What does ethnographic fieldwork in these places reveal? And how can we connect this knowledge to other sites of anthropological investigation? This chapter approaches these questions, drawing on the author's own longitudinal fieldwork in and between multiple locations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. Looking back in the history of anthropology to Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, it argues that—despite the many empirical differences between early twentieth-century Melanesia and twenty-first-century Central Asia—sea- and mountain-faring are not unrelated forms of mobility: navigating the verticality of the region, the stickiness of cultural stereotypes, new regimes of state power, transnational NGOs, and illicit forms of trade, the people of the Pamirs in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan meet familiar strangers and build new social relationships. Furthermore, this chapter argues that fieldwork on mobility in the mountainous margins of Central and South Asia offers alternate, yet complementary insights into contemporary anthropological research on an interconnected Asia. Stretching definitions of modernity, urbanity, and the center, the "astronauts" of the western Pamirs make a case for their planetary perspective from the rarefied air of their high-altitude home.

Introduction

In the region in High Asia in which I have conducted much of my ethnographic fieldwork— roughly covering the borderlands where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan meet— mobility across cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and political frontiers is of utmost importance to

people. Thus, a focus on modes of connectivity (or the lack of it) in the region—which we can, broadly speaking, refer to as "the Pamirs"—requires research in and between multiple locations. In the past two decades, this kind of anthropological research has usually been framed in the terms of George E. Marcus's paradigmatic article on "multi-sited ethnography," in which he argues for the "translative mapping of brave new worlds."[i] A decade later, in "A Not So Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Not So Imagined Community" Ghassan Hage provided a rebuttal to the trend that Marcus's call set in motion.[ii] Hage's article largely focuses on the difficulties of multi-sited ethnography in migration research, foregrounding the physical and psychological demands on the researcher that extensive air travel and overwhelming ruptures in social relations entail. Yet Hage also points to the fact that considerations of and reflections on multiple sites and circulations by no means simply belong to contemporary research in a globalizing world.[iii] In fact, he argues, we could go back to Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and the very foundations of anthropology to observe how mobility has informed research in a similar way in very different times and places.[iv]

In this chapter I take up this invitation to look at mobility and "multi-sitedness" in a longer time frame, making an unlikely comparison between some of the world's highest places above sea level and Malinowski's field in maritime Melanesia. My reasons for reading mobility in High Asia in relation to Malinowski's work on the Trobriand Islands require some elaboration, both conceptually and in light of an increasing polarization between the repudiators and defenders of anthropological classics.[v]

Malinowski's work on mobility and processes of exchange in the western Pacific is structured around the depths of the seas—tiny, scattered islands and atolls and the great expanses of water between them—and examines technologies to overcome the disconnection deriving from these depths and distances. In this chapter, I take these themes—ever cautious of the political and epistemological context in which Malinowski's research was produced— to argue for their useful relocation to the high-altitude environment of the Pamirs. *Argonauts*

of the Western Pacific tackles many issues that have remained salient themes in anthropology, but which are in need of extension and reformulation rather than mere repetition. In the following I would like to take up two points and build on them to make *three key arguments*.

The first point touches upon the questions of why, how, and where people travel, and how and to what ends we can follow them on the specific circuits and disconnections that arise along the way. The second point concerns processes of arrival, departure, disconnection, and (re)connection that are encapsulated in the opening sentence of Malinowski's ethnography, in which he calls the readers to imagine themselves "suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight."[vi] Modified versions of this image reflect widely recounted anthropological experiences of fieldwork as a rite of passage in which disconnection from old social relations and the establishment of new ones play a pivotal role.[vii] Replace the "tropical beach" with any other location of arrival, the "native village" with a settlement with a name, and the "launch or dinghy" with a different means of transport, and you might find yourself in any contemporary ethnography.

In the case of my own fieldwork, which I have been conducting in High Asia since 2008, my "tropical beaches" were a road maintenance outpost and an orchard beneath a fort, the "native villages" were the small towns of Murghab and Karimabad, and my "boats" were a Russian car and an ageing Pakistani jeep. Yet what is more—and this is the *first key argument* that I would like to explore in this chapter—the experience of disconnection, arrival, and newly established social ties has never been unique to me as an anthropologist. My informants, too, whom I frequently accompanied on their journeys, underwent experiences of profound strangeness, exoticism, and disconnection in the process of crossing the multiple frontiers that mark their world.

People in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan are both separated and united by different languages, religious identities, ethnicities, temporalities, and the

containers of the Afghan, Pakistani, and Tajik nation-states; by different colonial, post-colonial, and socialist histories; and by the verticality of high altitude.[viii] While some of these factors have long been inscribed into the region—materially and socially—others are outcomes of Russian and British colonialism, Cold War interventions, and more recent violent political incursions. In everyday life, these factors are inextricably entangled, rendering mobility across difference a central part of a three-dimensional ontology in which the vertical is bound up with changing compositions of air, culture, and power.[ix] Life and fieldwork in the Pamirs are subject to such changes, and the experience of the frontier is closely linked to elevation.

I would like to illustrate this chapter's *second key argument* with a brief vignette. When I met Mehmonsho in 2007 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital, he was in his forties, worked as a driver for an international NGO, and had just sent his son off to work as a security guard in Moscow. Yet before all that Mehmonsho had lived "many lives," as he told me, from a Soviet childhood in a serene village in the Pamirs to an opposition fighter in the Tajik civil war (1992–97) to a policeman to a driver for an NGO. During the war, he had ventured into the Afghan parts of the Pamirs, and after the war he sold cars in the less accessible, high-altitude parts of the region where, he told me, "the air gets so thin that you can barely breathe, where you need the training of an astronaut [*kosmonavt*] to survive." Later, in 2010, while conducting fieldwork in these parts of the Pamirs, I spotted Mehmonsho in the bazaar of Murghab, a small town at 3,650 m above sea level, where he had brought tourists in his employer's car. "Ah Tillo," he said, "you got your training and made it to the moon [*luna*]." When I asked him if such a trip with tourists was really worth risking his job, he laughed and said, "This isn't just about the money. It's about going somewhere different. Look at all these Kyrgyz here, look at how close we are to the sun. We should get ourselves sombreros."

Mehmonsho's experience is not at all an isolated one. In fact, many people I have met in the Pamirs—on all sides of the nation-state divides—have comparably complex biographies and spatial trajectories, albeit molded into very different late twentieth-century histories. These diverging spatial and historical trajectories, as well as specific modes of mobility and immobility, inform the perceptions of people across political and geographical boundaries as either familiar or "exotic others." Very early on in my fieldwork in 2008, I noted that my preconceived idea of what constitutes an ethnographic site was challenged by my informants' rapid and continuous movements across difference and physical space, as well as by their insistence on *not going* to certain places. These movements (and the absence of them) were—not surprisingly—informed by economic opportunities and constraints, but also by kin networks, pilgrimage, political change, transhumance, education, health, and sometimes simply by curiosity, fear, or the desire for adventure.

In his book *Asia as a Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that focusing on intra-Asian connections across cultural and political frontiers serves to decolonize, deimperialize, and "de-Cold War"-ize the study of their people and places.[x] Following Chen, this chapter's *third key argument* is that studying mobility in the Pamirs across the frontier contributes to an understanding of its seemingly separate entities. However, looking at how modes of connection and disconnection work, at how people in the Pamirs manage to maintain relationships across vast geographical, temporal, and cultural distances, and at when they decide—or are forced—to abandon these relationships is not a mere academic exercise. At a point in time when the geopolitical legacies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories seem to fade, overshadowed by a future-oriented turn to an expanding China, such a focus does political work, too. In recent years, a great deal of literature has been written on the everyday implications of connectivity and (neo)liberalization in Asia, often from the standpoint of urbanization.[xi] There is little doubt that this focus on the Asian metropolis, now often seen through the prism of Chinese investments connecting "centers" across Asia, is

likely to persist and grow.[xii] In contrast, the Pamirs at large offer us insights into a very different story of contemporary Asia, a story that is marked by the specter of remoteness, the weight of colonial and Cold War histories, the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics, and the ways people in the region organize their everyday lives amid these fragmentations.

Modern islands in a sea of tradition

In recent years few people have actually traveled overland between northern Pakistan and eastern Tajikistan, crossing Afghan Badakhshan. While there is published research on small-scale cross-border trade[xiii] and on Tajiks seeking refuge in Pakistan's Chitral District during the civil war,[xiv] physical journeys across nation-state boundaries are a relatively rare occurrence. Reasons for this include the complex border regimes enforced by all three countries, the continuing threat of war and violence on route in Afghanistan, and the lack of economic incentives to pursue such treks.

Nevertheless, during fieldwork in the area around Hunza and Gilgit in northern Pakistan in 2013, I heard intriguing accounts of such journeys from the few men who had traveled to Tajikistan since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Their travels had been sponsored by NGOs that sought to revive regional connectivity. These organizations imagined that such connectivity had been in place before the closure of the Soviet border and Cold War competition had firmed up the frontier. Among them was the Aga Khan Development Network, whose presence in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan is rooted in the Ismaili Muslim communities of the region. There are also several smaller NGOs that have promoted the revival of cross-border connectivity, including an organization that fosters such connections through the development of gem stone processing—a business very much linked to the region's mountainous geology.

Upon their return, the travelers had stories to tell about historical links between their homes and the places they had visited, but their observations were also focused on how

differently places across the region had developed in the course of time. Niaz, a man in his fifties who had traveled to Khorog, eastern Tajikistan's largest city at the Afghan border with a population of around 30,000, put this perhaps most pointedly. He told me that his journey from Pakistan to Tajikistan had been one from his home to "Europe." Niaz based his argument on the fact that in Khorog one could see girls in mini-skirts and "European style" houses. Niaz's statement was both spatial and temporal. He did not mean to say that Europe actually began beyond the northern border of Afghanistan. He rather referred to Khorog as part of a different cultural space—one that is more compatible with that of an imagined Europe than with that of an observed Afghanistan. While Niaz referred to Khorog as "European," in the same sentence he pointed to the places in Afghanistan through which he had traveled as "backward," using the English term. He based this observation on the fact that girls there did not wear mini-skirts and that people still used donkeys as a means of transport. This view gave Niaz's account a temporal twist that largely resonates with the ways people in the Pamirs situate ideas of modernity and progress on a scale of time that allows for the perception of different places co-existing in the present, yet living in different times.

Like in many other settings of mobility around the globe,[xv] even "local" people crossing the Pamirs' manifold frontiers tend to encounter an abundance of "exotic" places along the way. Malinowski's "tropical beaches" are not limited to the figure of the "foreigner" (*khoriji*) alone. Yet these encounters come with an important difference: what makes their setting distinct is that each of these "other" places comes with a historical memory, a sense that underneath the sand of these "beaches" is a fading connection that has been buried by the tides of the twentieth century. While the region's different nation-states have largely favored and often actively accelerated this process of fading in an attempt to pull the borderlands more tightly into the state's orbit, some local and international NGOs have been engaged in cross-border revival activities. Meanwhile, scholarly research has been

increasingly interested in how these different modes of connection and disconnection have come about in the first place.[xvi]

In parallel with other places throughout Asia, the Pamirs became infused with ideas of progress and modernity in the first half of the twentieth century. In this regard, the transformative, but slow, establishment of Soviet power in the region was certainly a driving force. At the same time, social activists embedded in Ismaili Muslim networks worked in a similar direction in the context of the late British Empire. While the ideological foundations of these projects were situated on opposite ends of the spectrum—Soviet socialism versus Islamicate (Cold War) liberalism—their engagement with people in the region was not entirely unrelated: both projects pursued the steady buildup of material and social infrastructures, of schools, pathways, roads, assembly halls, health facilities, and educational mobility on the territories of today's Tajikistan (Soviet) and Pakistan (Ismaili). This buildup accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century and took an unexpected turn when, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Ismaili-run Aga Khan Development Network extended its influence into Tajikistan and Afghanistan.[xvii]

As mentioned earlier, in the account of his journey across the Pakistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan borders and back, Niaz operated with the idea that not all places across the region had received their fair share of progress and modernity. As a result, one could observe material, temporal, and embodied differences between these places. My informants living along the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan have expressed similar views over the years: this border meanders along the river Panj, which delineates the boundary between the two countries. For the most part, the other bank of the river is so close that, with good eyes, one can observe everyday life across the water. In the Soviet period, people on the Tajik side witnessed how, over the decades, towns, an airport, electrified villages, roads, and other signs of infrastructural development appeared on their bank of the river, while little change took place on the Afghan side. This image has persisted despite the fact that, in the wake of the

international military intervention in 2001, donors made sure that Afghans received new roads and electricity generated by new micro-hydropower stations.

While Tajikistan's infrastructure has, in turn, crumbled such that the Afghan bank of the river sometimes shines brighter than its own, many of my informants in Tajikistan insist that Afghanistan is still "old" (*qadim*) and enmeshed in tradition and religious fanaticism. It is important to note that such "civilizational" differences are rarely mapped onto whole nation-states or the former Soviet Union per se. Instead, people identify very specific "islands" of modernity, which are often surrounded by temporally and culturally different areas. In the case of the Soviet Union, such islands were created following the logic of enclosure, incorporation, and provisioning (*obespechenie*) of strategically selected places.[xviii] Considered a sensitive border area, the Pamirs were part of this scheme, colloquially known as "Moscow provisioning" (*Moskovskoe obespechenie*), a term that refers to the direct cultural, aesthetic, and political connections to Moscow that this status implied.[xix] To this day, many parts of the Pamirs are infused with a sense of urban lifestyle, and the residents cling to the notion that they are still somehow culturally and temporally different from people in other places in Tajikistan—even its capital Dushanbe.

In contrast, the inhabitants of Niaz's home town—Karimabad in northern Pakistan—draw on a very different sense of history. As mentioned earlier, ideas of progress and their material incarnation date back to the first half of the twentieth century, when social and religious activists fostered educational opportunities. In the second half of the twentieth century these efforts coincided with the construction of the Karakoram Highway. Previously, travel along the footpaths between Karimabad and down-country Pakistan was a harrowing and seemingly endless undertaking. With the completion of the highway, however, Karimabad, and the Hunza Valley in which the town is located, became a prime humanitarian laboratory for the Aga Khan Development Network. From the 1980s onward, multiple large-

scale projects transformed the valley not only in terms of education and health, but also with respect to social organization, agriculture, animal husbandry, and tourism.[xx]

While Pakistani state and media discourse depict the country's north as overwhelmingly remote and exotic,[xxi] the people living in Karimabad see these transformations as the reason for high literacy rates in the area, for mobility, and for their worldly outlook beyond the borders of Pakistan. In contrast to places in Tajikistan that were hand-picked to be linked to the center (Moscow), locales in Hunza have attained their status as islands of modernity through a complex interplay of NGO work, religious-humanitarian networks, and the expansion of Pakistani state power. Nevertheless, in both cases—socialist engineering on the one hand and humanitarian laboratory on the other—the basic idea has been that of distinction from the surrounding areas. This is what makes them islands in a vast sea of perceived temporal difference. A trip from one island to the other is therefore never simply a journey through space, but also one through time.

Ships of the desert and other lunar animals

The *Bar Varka* is located on Khorog's Ulitsa Gagarina, a street dedicated to Yurii Gagarin who—in his spacecraft *Vostok* ("East")—was the first human to venture into outer space. Dinners, and even lunches, at the *Varka* are usually intoxicating occasions, a feature that some of my friends in Khorog attribute to the outlet's heavy food, which, they say, can only be digested with plenty of booze. *Varka*'s seating sections are assembled along the windows and the inner wall, leaving sufficient space to dance between the two dining areas. Few guests resist the temptation to move their legs after a meal that has left them with heads and stomachs heavy from vodka and mayonnaise-laden dishes with alluring names such as "Scent of Love" (*aromat liubvi*) and "Parisian cutlets" (*kotleta po-parizhski*).

On an evening in mid-summer 2011, I sat with a group of Khorogi friends in the *Varka* and we talked about the higher parts of the Pamirs along the border with China, from

where I had just arrived a day earlier. Manzura, an office clerk and, back then, about thirty years old, said, while trying to drown out a *Modern Talking* song, "Tilljon, I think you're a bit crazy to keep going back there. What's there except for yaks and headaches?" While I was contemplating my response, Jamshed, a teacher in Khorog who frequently travels to his home village further up the Ghunt Valley, stepped in and replied for me. "It makes sense to go to Murghab," he said. "It's serene; it's peaceful there and you can eat meat every single day. You might have bad dreams from the lack of oxygen, but it's not like the city. I stayed there once in a yurt at a hunting camp for a few weeks, and I'd go back if I had the time."

Manzura's and Jamshed's statements reflect common Khorogi viewpoints on the high-altitude parts of the Pamirs. To them, Khorog—located at the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border—is a city that, despite its small population of 30,000, has two universities, important administrative institutions, and the possibility of an urban lifestyle. To juxtapose the city with "empty" high-altitude space is part of a common imaginary that resonates in both Manzura's undivided love for the urban and Jamshed's longing to escape it. Not surprisingly, people in Murghab—the district encompassing much of the area Manzura and Jamshed referred to—have a different take on this issue. Viewed from Murghab, the question of remoteness is no doubt an important one. It influences the way people experience the presence and absence of the state, for instance through the lack of quality educational and healthcare facilities. Sometimes Murghabis also reflect the same dichotomy as Manzura and Jamshed by emphasizing that their parts of the Pamirs are much "purer" (*taza*) than those closer to the orbit of "the city" (*shaar*), meaning Khorog. However, what marks Murghabi views on Murghab is that apparent contradictions can go hand in hand and allow for both the perception of an empty, lunar space and of that of an intensely connected region, populated by humans, animals, and spirits.

When I met him in July 2015, Sorbon, an engineer working for one of the major mobile network providers in Murghab, had just come back from his daily routine of refueling

the generator that keeps phone connections going in the small town. After rushing through the door of a friend's house, he sat down for a cup of tea and said, "It takes so much fuel to keep mobile connections stable, to Dushanbe, to Moscow, and for you to Europe." Sorbon had studied in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe in the 1980s and ever since worked for different telecommunication companies. "They've always listened in on what we say to each other here," Sorbon continued. "Now they store our conversations and messages on servers in the capital. Back in the Soviet Union they installed big satellite dishes and antennas in Murghab with which they could listen to conversations from around the world. We don't call it 'the roof of the world' [*kryshe mira*] for nothing. From here you can listen better."

The act of listening is not only linked to surveillance and the presence of state power in this borderland. It is also a constitutive act in anthropology, and this intersection might be why anthropologists are frequently mistaken for spies in this and other parts of the world. Listening to others talking about listening and observing how others listen are activities that have long been part of ethnographic endeavors. Indeed, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski mentions the act of listening multiple times as an underlying theme that stands at the heart of his methodology. This methodology is not only centered around the ethnographer listening to people talking, but also around the observation of people listening. This observation, in turn, provides a window into social interactions that are linked to broader formations of historical memory, ritual, and hierarchy.

On the one hand, in Murghab, one can "listen better," as Sorbon put it, because sounds overlap and interfere with one another less here than elsewhere. Once the Chinese trucks have passed through the settlement, the dogs take a break from their barking, and the children go to sleep, one can hear otherwise unheard voices: the "fire talking" (*ot sülöit*) in the stove, an ancestral spirit (*arbak*) rushing through the house, or—further away from the town—the sound of a lone Soviet car crossing the summer pasture (*jailoo*), yaks puffing in their sleep, and—if the wind blows in just the right direction—faint music from a far off, neighboring

yurt. On the other hand, listening to humans talk can sometimes be tricky in Murghab, not only because some mistake listening for spying, but also because people's lives in the high-altitude environment are extremely busy.

While Murghab lacks a proper entertainment industry, the often insufficient electricity supply, large families, the chores of cattle breeding, and the harsh climate make up for it by keeping people busy around the clock. Thus, catching Kamal, a government worker, was never an easy task, but when we managed to meet our conversations usually plumbed the depths of Murghabi history. During a meeting on a cold winter afternoon in 2010, I told Kamal about my research on the Pamir Highway connecting Murghab with Khorog and Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. He listened carefully and then reminded me that Khorog and Osh had not always been the most obvious destinations for people in Murghab. He told me that prior to Soviet road construction, the path to Osh took almost twice as long as the route to Kashgar in what is today China's Xinjiang province. "People from Murghab would take their cattle to the market in Kashgar and traders from there would come by camel to us to exchange cattle for goods." He emphasized that camels could handle the high altitudes while horses—just as some people from the flatlands—were likely to suffer from ill health when ascending into thin air. "Not everyone can stand the elevation of Murghab," Kamal stated. "After the camel came the automobile on the road, and Soviet trucks, and then Chinese trucks and cars from all over the world." When I asked him about other connections that the region's national boundaries had closed off from the 1940s onward, Kamal said, "For our ancestors there was no Tajikistan, no Afghanistan, no China. They moved back and forth. Now there's very little movement in this area. Go to the hunting camps at the border with Afghanistan, lie still and don't look out for people. Then you can see Marco Polo sheep crossing without passports and visas. If you're lucky you'll spot a snow leopard, too, sneaking through, perhaps from as far away as Pakistan. They're the only travelers these days."

Power across the water

Kamal's take on borders in the Pamirs largely corresponds to my own observations over the years: movement across international boundaries in the Pamirs is not primarily shaped by high altitude and other environmental conditions, but is channeled through shifting power relations between political actors and local populations. While humans are busy negotiating the conditions on which they build these relationships, wild animals indeed escape the picture and remain largely invisible. At the same time, these animals are closely involved in political processes through their inclusion in frameworks of species conservation, lucrative hunting camps whose owners profit from privileged ties to the government, and the consumption of locally popular game meat. Discourses on connection and disconnection are also linked to the mobile force of the elements, such as winds[xxii] that blow from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and which people in Murghab often attribute to "black" (*kara*) religious rituals performed by mullahs on the Afghan side of the border, and water,[xxiii] most materially and symbolically explicit in the form of the river Panj marking the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The river Panj splits the Wakhan Valley into a Tajik side to the north and an Afghan side to the south. Many people from across the Pamirs, as well as Tajik and international tourists, travel to the Tajik part of the Wakhan for its hot springs and pilgrimage sites. Some of my informants from Murghab traveled to the *mazar* ("pilgrimage site") of Bibi Fotima to perform fertility-enhancing rituals. I also met people from Khorog on holiday in small sanatoriums close to the valley's various hot springs. From all these places villages in Afghanistan are visible on the opposite bank of the river, whose water levels fluctuate throughout the year and are sometimes so low that people can walk across this still sensitive former Cold War boundary.

For people from other parts of the Pamirs the border river is still the final frontier, beyond which the land is considered wild and unknown. For those living in the Wakhan, however, the outlook onto the Afghan side is rather complex. While many see Afghanistan as

eternally backward and dangerous, many family connections, spiritual lineages, and actual face-to-face encounters across the border have persisted to the present day.[xxiv] During my 2016 fieldwork in a Tajik village whose fields are so close to the river that they are regularly flooded, I was told detailed stories of decades-long cross-border exchanges by foot or horse. These ranged from family visits to humanitarian aid during the Soviet war in Afghanistan to starving Tajik citizens looking for food in the villages of their distant Afghan relatives in the 1990s to more recent business deals in the trafficking of drugs and booze. At one point during my fieldwork, a long and expensive detour through the official border crossing at Ishkashim—the entry to the Wakhan—finally took me to the Afghan counterpart of the Tajik village. I was tempted to simply walk across the river back into Tajikistan, but too much water and, more importantly, my fear of detention in this still uneasy borderland prevented me from doing so.

In the Afghan village, which grew substantially as a result of emigration across the river under early Soviet rule in the 1920s and 1930s, peoples' attitudes toward illicit border crossings were much more relaxed. To be sure, they depicted their walks through the river as adventurous and exciting, but this had less to do with the act of wading through the water than with the nature of the goods being transported. Prime objects of exchange, I was told by Rahim, a farmer in his mid-20s, are opium and heroin leaving Afghanistan and booze entering from Tajikistan. Then, as he laid out the dinner he had invited me to, he stated apologetically, "If there wasn't so much water in the river this summer we would be drinking *arak* [vodka] now." As the evening progressed, Rahim explained how he visits Tajikistan under cover of darkness. "I call one of the mobile numbers in Tajikistan," he said, "and I make an appointment. Either somebody comes across from the Tajik side or I put on my chest waders and walk through the river. … Sometimes I buy some *arak* and a few cans of *Jack Power*. *Arak*, wine, and *Jack Power* are brought over here from Tajikistan. Opium and heroin are taken by the state [*davlat khati*] to Tajikistan further down the valley at Ishkashim."

State institutions' close involvement in and exercise of control over opium and heroin trafficking is an open secret in both Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Goods are transported across bridges, inside tires, and by rubber dinghy. In the meantime, the regionally famous *Vodka Tojikiston* makes its opposite way through the river in plastic bottles, loaded onto male bodies. These male bodies are fueled by what Rahim and his friends called *Jack Power*—a liquid substance believed to sharpen the senses, improve physical strength, and enhance virility. It took me a while to find out what *Jack Power* was and where it came from: when I eventually crossed back into Tajikistan and asked in one of the Wakhan's grocery stores for a can of *Jack Power*, the shop owner laughed and pointed to a large pile of black cans behind him. Red letters on the can said *Jaguar*, and a closer look revealed that *Jaguar* was a Russian-produced alcoholic energy drink. The shop owner asked where I had heard the name *Jack Power* and laughed again when I told him that this was the beverage's name on the other side of the river. Then he said, "They're out of their minds over there. They drink this stuff like crazy [*divona*]! Hey! You've crossed the border. How do I know you're not a terrorist?"

Like many locales in the region, the two sides of the river Panj stand for the ambivalence of physical proximity, for the simultaneity of mobility and disconnection, and for the powerful legacy of historical identities. The transformation of a run-of-the-mill Russian energy drink into a mythical elixir is part of this complex: while the very opportunity to trade booze across the Panj is based on a deep sense of shared ethno-linguistic identities and kin networks, cans of *Jaguar* journey through the water only to reappear on the other bank as *Jack Power*. Almost a century of intermittent separation and othering have led to the establishment of binaries such as *Jack Power* versus *Jaguar*, tradition versus modernity, and terrorism versus security. These binaries are sticky labels and persist despite a multitude of circulations across the region. Thus, both the capacity to get rid of colonial, Cold War, and nationalist legacies and the impossibility of doing so sit at the intimate nexus of everyday life

where the body, the matter inhabiting and surrounding it, and the categories used to describe their relations all come together.

Conclusion

Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* gives us a view from the boat that unfolds into cosmological verticality. Economy, social relations, and a taste for adventure emerge as inextricably linked across the relatively flat surface of the Pacific. In contrast, using cars and trucks instead of boats, the astronauts of the Pamirs ascend to physical heights from where the perspective is planetary. They navigate remoteness and attempt to overcome the obstacles of a dry and rocky land. Their pathways, however, do not simply lead them up and down. Pamiris also head east and west, north and south: large numbers of people from Pakistan's portion of the area work in the Gulf; Wakhis from Afghanistan make their way to Lahore and Karachi; Tajiks construct apartment buildings and stadiums in Moscow; and overall there is an increasing orientation toward China.

Yet, as I have argued, people from this borderland do not need to travel far to encounter the "exotic." In fact, the other is always close by in the Pamirs. It is in the neighboring country, one valley beyond, across the river, one village further, next door, and sometimes even an experience within. Building on Viveiros de Castro's (1992) Amerindian perspectivism, Ghassan Hage notes the critical potential of the realization that humans live "continuously and concurrently in a multiplicity of realities" and that this offers an "important meta-ethnographic consolidation of the critical anthropological ethos of 'we can be other than what we are.'"[xxv] The Afghanistan–Pakistan–Tajikistan border region represents not only such radical difference enshrined in a history of colonial, Cold War, and nationalist separation, but also attempts to overcome this difference through various forms of mobility and references to history.

Against this backdrop, I have argued that some of the answers to the questions of why and by what means people depart, arrive, and establish new—or revive old—social relationships lie in both shared mobility and shared immobility. Much of Malinowski's work employs this methodology to capture a circuit—the *Kula* ring—which revolves around the exchange of bracelets and necklaces in the western Pacific. So, is there a *Kula* of the Pamirs? The answer is yes and no. There are small, scattered, and interrupted circuits of exchange that are linked to shared belonging in this politically fragmented region. To grasp the meaning of this fragmentation and the lack of broader circuits, we might turn to Edward Evans-Pritchard's critique of *Argonauts*, in which he argues that "Malinowski failed to see clearly what is perhaps the most significant feature of the *kula*, the bringing together, through the acceptance of common ritual values, of politically autonomous communities."[xxvi] Inverting this argument for the Pamirs, I suggest that precisely because the borderland populations of the region have been constantly pulled into settings of political dependency—colonial, socialist, nationalist—no overarching common ritual values are in place today. To be sure, local travelers, anthropologists, NGO workers, and religious envoys alike have continuously sought to traverse the many boundaries of this sea above the clouds. At the same time, however, this part of High Asia is still awaiting more profound attempts at decolonization, deimperialization, and "de-Cold War"-ization, all of which would require conscious, and concerted, political and academic efforts.

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